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ABSTRACT

Creation of a parent license would validate parental rights, establish parental responsibility, and provide a basis for societal support of parenting through financial benefits, parent education and training, and protective services for children. Government has played an increasing role in family life through laws defining and mandating parental responsibilities because too many parents neglect their childrearing responsibilities or have misused their power. Childrearing styles that produce competent adults are characterized by secure relationships with dependable parents who model self-control; lack of bonding with parents is the critical factor related to future criminal behavior, abuse, and neglect. Economic factors related to affluence and material aspirations, attitudinal factors emphasizing individualism and dependency on experts, and psychological factors regarding absent or insecure parent-child attachment bonds underlie contemporary social values that undermine parenting and obscure the importance of competent parenting to society. Because society's future depends upon competent parents and children, parents are accountable to, and need the support of, society. Rather than assuming that all parents are competent, it is more accurate to assume that most parents are competent, but children need protection from incompetent parents. Society may strengthen parenting by creating a paradigm in which parenthood is an earned relationship, with a license signifying that the parent is committed to rearing the child. Procedures for licensing parents would involve timing of application, licensure criteria, and administration. By increasing competent parenting, parent licenses would substantially reduce the need for governmental intervention in families. (KDFB)

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REDUCING GOVERNMENTAL INTERVENTIONS IN FAMILIES BY LICENSING PARENTS

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Abstract: Government has played an increasing role in family life because too many parents have not fulfilled their childrearing responsibilities. The misuse of parental power in child abuse and the abdication of parental responsibilities in child neglect have necessitated governmental interventions in order to protect children. A parent license would validate parental rights, establish parental responsibility, and provide a basis for the societal support of parenting in the form of financial benefits, parent education and training, and protective services for children when necessary. By generally increasing competent parenting, it would substantially reduce the need for governmental interventions in families.

Key Words: Attachment bonding, child abuse, child advocacy, child neglect, children's rights, criminality, families, family wage, parental rights, parenting standards, poverty, welfare dependency.

In the United States we expect competence and reliability—at least in other people. We expect that telephones will work, that checks will be honored, that prices will be honestly displayed, that the contents of foods will be labeled, that contracts will be honored, that manufactured goods will be warranted, that transportation schedules will be dependable, and that laws and regulations will be enforced. Travel through many foreign countries makes one realize how much we take the role of our government for granted in fulfilling these expectations in the United States.

The single exception to our expectation that systems will work is the parenting of biological children. Because we hold no public expectations for parents who conceive and give birth to children, the neglect and abuse of children has reached epidemic proportions in the United States.[1] Almost 7 million children have been neglected or abused. At least one of three of the 3.6 million who have been both abused and neglected will grow up to be violent, habitual criminal, or welfare dependent members of our society.[2]

Sociological research relates criminality and child abuse and neglect to poverty, unemployment, and racial discrimination. But by far most poor or unemployed people and most members of minority groups do not engage in criminal behavior or abuse or neglect their children. The critical factor in the backgrounds of those who do is the lack of attachment bonding with parents during the early years of their childhoods because of parental neglect and abuse.[3] Children who have been neglected and abused are unlikely to become competent, reliable adults.

How Children Become Competent and Reliable Adults

We can expect competence and reliability in business and professional transactions in the United States because of our laws and regulations. But compliance with these expectations depends upon persons having internalized values that support competence and reliability. Persons who have not internalized these values exploit others on large scales as white collar criminals and on smaller scales as underclass criminals.

In order to how adults become competent and reliable, we need to look at the way in which children internalize values. Childrearing styles that produce competent, reliable adults have a common denominator: the parents' formed attachment bonds with their children, and their behavior modeled their values. Their children learned early in life that their parents meant what they said and trusted their children to do likewise. Although their parents expressed their values, they did not impose them. They acknowledged their mistakes. They transmitted the importance of learning to their children. They encouraged their children's interests and creativity. Biologically vulnerable children especially need parents with these qualities.

The failure of children to develop competence and reliability is understandable when parents and influential adults do not model these qualities. The message from those parents and adults is, "Do as I say, not as I do." As a result those parents find themselves repeating admonitions and chastising their children, who test limits because they have not internalized

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desired values. These children either overtly rebel against or covertly sabotage their parents, both with self-defeating consequences for the children.

Children who grow up without competent parenting are disadvantaged. In extreme instances, parents misuse their power and abuse their children or abdicate their responsibilities and neglect their children. Their children become the sources of most of our social problems. When parents respect their children and provide adequate love and limits, their children respect them and other adults. Adult competence and reliability flow from secure relationships with dependable parents who model self-control.

Society Depends upon Competent Parents

The future of our society depends upon competent parents whose children learn from the past, plan for the future, and live productively in the present. Parents are in the best position to represent the interests of their children. But we need to move beyond the belief that children are the property of their parents to do with as they wish. We need to see parenting through the eyes of children and of society. For this reason, parents are accountable to, and need the support of, society.

Now all parents are assumed to be competent until they damage their children by abuse or neglect. A more accurate assumption is that most parents are competent, but children now, as in the past, need protection from incompetent parents.

The evolution of families has been marked by successive restrictions on the authority of parents over their children by religious and secular institutions. The span of the history of families in Western civilization reveals an original primacy of family relationships imbedded in a community, a subsequent loss of family ties through migration, a gradual return of family relationships, and a recent fragmentation of those relationships.[4]

Families originated out of clans with power invested in leaders and fathers, who were free to do as they wished with their wives and children. This meant absolute power over the life of a child, including the right to kill the child.

The Jewish tradition introduced marriage as a sacred bond between husband and wife with procreation as its goal. Husband and wife were seen as children of God, as were children. Fathers no longer had absolute power over the lives of their children, but they remained the heads of their households.

In the context of the rights of individuals, Christianity introduced the idea that wives and husbands should mutually respect each other and that children were autonomous beings whose loyalties were primarily to God.

The Industrial Revolution stripped away many of the functions of the family, which was the dominant social institution during the Agricultural Age. Production went out of homes, education shifted from the home to schools, and the care of the elderly fell to the state.

In recent decades a shift in childrearing values has affected family life. During the post World War II period, parents had a strong commitment to providing their children with more material resources than they had when they were young. There was an emphasis on respecting the wishes of children that led to overindulgence. The young became alienated from the older, as the Vietnam War without an obvious national purpose intensified the disillusionment of the young in their elders. The civil rights movement heightened the demand for equal treatment and raised aspirations for minority groups.

In the United States the last century has witnessed the appearance of child labor laws, child abuse and neglect laws, mandatory education laws, juvenile courts, family courts, and child support laws. In recent years the trend toward sidestepping parental responsibilities in childbearing and childrearing has resulted in fatherless families, uncommitted parents, and unprecedented levels of child neglect and abuse necessitating a series of new laws that define parental responsibilities. Laws now mandate parental participation in school conferences when their children pose behavior problems, the liability of grandparents for the children of their children, the liability of parents for the crimes of

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their children, stringent interstate enforcement of child support laws, and divorce custody and visitation arrangements. Because of the delegation of child care by parents, regulations have been made for day care, nursery schools, schools, and others who are responsible for aspects of children's lives. All of these laws are moving in the direction of applying the parenting standards set forth in child abuse and neglect laws before rather than after children are damaged by abuse and neglect.

If each child in this country was raised by a competent parent, each child might have a chance to succeed in life. But the dominant values of our society undermine parenting. The things we prize in the United States—opportunities for individuals and profitable commerce—also breed family breakdown, inequality, cynicism, vulgarity, and crime.

Anti-parenting Values

A number of economic, attitudinal, and psychological factors underlie contemporary social values that undermine parenting and obscure the vital importance of competent parenting to society.

Economic Factors

The economic factors relate to affluence, poverty, mobility, and material aspirations. Our capitalistic emphasis on consumerism values material possessions above human relationships.

As it now stands, the parenting does not fit into the political scene in which remunerative employment is valued more than sacrificial parenting. Our society makes it difficult for parents who must compete economically with adults without children and who must sacrifice their own needs for their children. No longer is the "family wage" of one breadwinner the standard for incomes.[5] Two incomes are needed to support many families. The wealthy delegate child care, and the poor struggle to find jobs and child care while they are employed away from home. Some resort to crime as a way of surviving.

The financial value of parenting needs to be recognized. Competent parents contribute $1 million to our economy for each child they rear. Incompetent parents cost society $2 million for each child they damage by neglect and abuse.[6]

Attitudinal Factors

The attitudinal factors that undermine parenting reflect the narcissistic flavor of our society. They revolve around an emphasis on individualism and on a dependency on experts.

The masculine stereotype of "rugged individualism." is expressed in the following images: 1) the audacious defiance of authority; 2) acquiring more and bigger things; 3) being strong willed; 4) thrill seeking; 5) fighting for what is right (for me) by bringing down others; 6) the sense of power and security from owning a gun; and 7) "striking it rich" by gambling. None of these images foster the interdependence and personal accountability required for rewarding parenting. Instead the individualism has loosened family ties.

The freedom of individuals to act without restraints is a treasured principle in the United States. One facet of individual freedom is the privacy of one's personal life, home, and family. On the positive side, this privacy relieves individuals of the pressures of conformity and the prying eyes of others. On the negative side, it diminishes the accountability of parents to society and conceals child abuse and neglect. It obscures the fact that learning how to be responsible for one's actions in one's family prepares a child for responsible citizenship.

The detachment from a sense of accountability to others resulting from an emphasis on individual freedom has led to a general lack of commitment in personal relationships, as seen in easy divorce, cohabitation, and the avoidance of child support responsibilities.

The contemporary dependence on experts is the narcissistic outgrowth of individualism. It is based on the desire to maximize one's interests and to achieve perfection. One result is the paradox in which parents are more devoted to their children but have

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greater problems in managing them. Following expert advice, they are sensitive to their children's distress. Because they want their children to be happy, they avoid frustrating them. They also fear their children's anger and try to win their demanding children's love. The frustration of their own needs heightens their dilemma as they react out of anger toward their children. Then they feel guilty because influential experts tell them not to react in anger or to physically restrain their children.

Individualism promotes an anti-authority attitude. In the absence of informal cultural restraints, individuals can avoid accountability to others unless they are convicted of crimes. The increasing options in life cause indecisiveness regarding which options are "best for me." A quest for perfection and for pleasure and avoiding discomfort and frustration intensifies this view. The result is increased stress for parents as the desire to "have it all" has become the goal. This attitude threatens the integrity of families which depends upon accommodating and sacrificing individual interests.

Psychological Factors

The psychological factors that adversely affect parenting are related to absent or insecure parent-child attachment bonds that interfere with forming committed family and social relationships.

The psychological self is formed from internalized models of self-regulation learned from dependable parenting. Trusting a parental "holding environment" leads to the trust of others and of oneself. Insecurity regarding parental love and limits leads to a mistrust of others and of oneself. The continuity of society depends upon the competence and reliability of individuals, which is based upon secure attachment bonding. In contrast the lack of attachment bonding results in a lack of empathy for others, which in turn leads to a lack of respect for others (and for oneself) and a failure to internalize cultural values.

Our society fails to recognize parenthood as a developental stage of life and parenting as a psychological growth experience for both parents and children. This is seen in the view of parenting as caregiving that can be delegated to others. The importance of child-parent attachment bonding to society is downplayed.

The Need for Governmental Interventions

The appropriate role of government is to do what individuals cannot do for themselves, such as maintaining civil order which is disrupted by the results of incompetent parenting.

We would not need law enforcement personnel and facilities if every citizen respected the rights of others. We would not need welfare if every individual was capable of, and had the opportunity to lead, an economically productive life. Unfortunately, the human condition is not characterized by these qualities. We always will need law enforcement and some form of welfare. We always will need to contend with the social repercussions of incompetent parents.

Because persuasion and education are insufficient, the only way that our society is able to set standards for any kind of behavior that affects other persons is through regulation. The government has played an increasing role in family life because too many parents have not fulfilled their childrearing responsibilities. The misuse of parental power in child abuse and the abdication of parental responsibilities in child neglect have necessitated governmental interventions in order to protect children. Because the oppression, neglect, and exploitation of children cripple the next generation, the government has a clear-cut responsibility to act to prevent child neglect and abuse.

A New Paradigm for Parenting

We have come to the point in our society where a new paradigm for childrearing is needed. The current paradigm is that anyone who conceives or gives birth to a child has the full care and custody of that child until the child is damaged by abuse or neglect. No one asks if that person is capable of parenting that child. That person, often referred to as the

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"real" parent, can lay claim to the child years after the child has bonded to parents who reared the child.

A strong argument can be made that every female and every male has a biological right to conceive a child and that every female has a biological right to give birth to a child. But parenthood is an earned relationship signified by the commitment of a parent to rearing a child. It is not permanently awarded by the events of conception or childbirth.

We need a paradigm in which parents are expected to be competent and reliable and to not abuse or neglect their children.—a paradigm in which parenting is seen as a privilege rather than as a biological right.

The designation of parenting as an earned privilege could be implemented by setting standards for parenting though a licensing process. A parent license would validate parental rights, establish parental responsibility, and provide a basis for the governmental support of parenting in the form of financial benefits, parent education and training, and protective services for children when necessary. It would make parents accountable for childrearing.

A license for parents would place the responsibility for childrearing on parents not on the government. Just as individual responsibility for driving a motor vehicle is promoted by being qualified for a driver's license, individual responsibility for childrearing would be promoted by ensuring that a parent is qualified to rear a child. Then there would be little need for direct governmental interventions. Parents, not the schools or private or public agencies, would bear the responsibility for rearing their children.

Parenting Licensure

Although perhaps seeming utopian and unworkable, procedures for licensing parents actually would entail little more administrative effort than currently is involved in marriage licensing, birth registration, and protective services for children.[7] The idea of licensing is to accord parenting respected status in society, not to create a new bureaucracy.

With a licensing process the question of parental fitness would be faced before rather than after damage to a child. Licensing would hold a parent responsible for being competent rather than forcing children to endure incompetent parenting until they themselves show publicly recognized signs of damage. The responsibility for demonstrating parental competence before a child is damaged would be with the parent, rather than with the state which now has the responsibility to demonstrate parental incompetence after a child has been damaged.

The Timing of Application

There are three times at which a parent license could be issued. The first is prior to conception either at the time of marriage, on acceptance for adoption, or at the time of an unmarried person's decision to become a parent. This could be handled through the existing marriage license procedures.

The second time is during the pregnancy. Application for a license could be made during prenatal care as an earlier extension of birth registration.

The third time is at the of birth of a child. The already established procedure for registering births provides a structured point of contact at which the existence of a license could be ascertained; a license also could be obtained then.

Licensure Criteria

The requirements for obtaining a parenting license would be straightforward so that they could be easily met, as they are now for a marriage license. Unlike a marriage license, it would be obtained for each parent and validated for each child. The requirements could be based on the following principles.

The first principle would be that a parent should be able to assume responsibility for one's own life before assuming responsibility for a child's life. The attainment of adulthood would be a reasonable age based on physical, social, and emotional maturity and the likelihood of completion of a high school education. For minors, as now with marriage, parental consent and parental assumption of responsibility for the minor and the child

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would be required so that the minor could obtain a provisional parenting license that would be fully validated when the minor becomes an adult.

The second principle would be certification by the applicant that he or she agrees to care for and nurture the child and to refrain from abusing and neglecting the child. If this agreement was broken at a later time, the intervention upon a parent's rights then would be based upon the failure of that parent to fulfill a contractual commitment to the child with revocation of the license rather than upon a quasi-criminal action, as is now the case.

The third principle would be that the parent should have some knowledge of childrearing, such as indicated by completing a parenting course or its equivalent. Family life education already is provided in many communities, clincs, and public schools. Although the actual benefit of education in influencing parenting behavior is uncertain, the overall impact of such a program would likely reinforce awareness of the gravity of childrearing responsibilities and discourage premature childbearing. From the point of view of society, family life education is more important than any other academic subject. Moreover, the need for education in parenting is widely perceived by parents today.

Administration

The administration of parent licensing would be a preventive extension of protective services for children at the level of state and local governments, although enabling federal legislation, such as requiring licensure for the receipt of federal funds, would be helpful in encouraging nationwide consistency. A new bureaucracy would not be needed, since licensing would involve revising the mandates of the existing marriage licensing, birth registration, and child protection systems.

The license application process could be handled through the framework of marriage licensing and birth registration since it would be a credentialing process. Questionable situations and the appeals-intervention process could be handled through existing protective services for children in county departments of human services guided by state statutes. The shift of protective services for children from an adversarial criminal focus after children have been damaged to a preventive focus would reduce the need for extensive interventions years later. Vulnerable parents and children would be identified at the outset of the children's lives, and parent support services could be provided earlier than is now possible.

A general parenting license for each mother and father would be granted on meeting the criteria. It would then be validated for each child, clearly establishing a child–parent contract that includes financial responsibility and childrearing competence.

If protective services for a child were invoked by actual child abuse or neglect, the license could be placed on probationary status while treatment was ongoing, or it could be suspended during foster placement of the child and treatment of the parent. When a parent was unable or unwilling to remedy demonstrated incompetence, the license could be judicially revoked for that child through existing termination of parental rights procedures modified to correspond with license revocation rather than the present quasi-criminal procedures.

If a parent was ineligible for a license because of age or incapacity, that person could be issued a provisional license under the aegis of children's protective services with either concomitant parent training and supervision or foster placement. There would be a specified time during which that person could qualify for a regular license. If the person proved unable to qualify at the end of that time, that person's parental rights would be terminated, and the child would be adopted in accordance with child abuse and neglect laws.

If a parent did not meet licensing standards, child protection laws would be invoked at the time of the child's birth. The custody of the child would be with an agency, and the child's placement would be determined by the circumstances of the situation, as it is now. Mothers who are minors could obtain provisional licenses underwritten by their own parents who agreed to do so and who met foster parent standards themselves.

The question of whether a child should be removed from an unlicensed mother at birth for adoption or whether the mother should care for the child under a provisional

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license with support and supervision would hinge on the most likely outcome. If the outlook was favorable and the risk to the child was low, therapeutic support of the mother with a provisional license would be preferable both from the mother's and the child's points of view. On the other hand, if the treatment outlook for the mother was unfavorable, adoption would be preferrable from the child's point of view to the alternative of foster care while attempts were made to help the mother. Adoption also would meet the needs of the large pool of qualified adults who wish to adopt infants and young children.

The administration of protective services for children and the enforcement of child abuse and neglect statutes would be facilitated by parent licensing. From the legal point of view, the burden of proof would lie with parents to demonstrate evidence of minimal competence, or of their "parental fitness" in legal terms, rather than on the state, as is now the case, to prove "parental unfitness." If the state required all parents to become licensed before or upon the birth of their children, much later case-by-case adjudication under child protection laws after parents have damaged their children could be avoided, saving enormous amounts of time, financial expense, and other social costs.

Conclusion

The family is the most important institution for developing competent and reliable citizens. Without internalized controls acquired though parent-child attachment bonds, individuals are at the mercy of their urges and desires. Without parental modeling of prosocial values, a child becomes less than human, driven by uncontrolled impulses to the detriment of everyone, especially the child. Successful living with respect for oneself and for others grows from competent, reliable parenting.

Competent parenting is essential for the survival of our society because of the forces in our society that encourage individualism and the expression of impulses. Preserving our society as one that "works" depends upon parents who help children acquire internal controls so that they can become competent, reliable citizens. Parents are in the best position to represent the interests of their children, but they also are accountable to society.

Our society must strengthen rather than weaken parenting. This can be done by recognizing parenting as a privilege supported by society. Making our expectations of parents clear by setting standards for parenting would place the responsibility for developing competent citizens on parents rather than on the schools and on governmental programs. Setting standards for parenting would help to prevent child neglect and abuse and their consequences of violence, habitual crime, and welfare dependency.

A parent license would validate parental rights, establish parental responsibility, and provide a basis for societal support in the form of financial benefits, parent education and training, and protective services for children when necessary. Holding parents accountable for childrearing would substantially reduce the need for governmental interventions in families.

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